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Filling in Blank Spots: Soviet-Polish History and Polish Renewal

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In May 1987 Moscow and Warsaw announced the formation of the Joint History Commission to clarify the "blank spots" — the taboo or falsified subjects — in the common history of the two countries. The Commission, the only such body in the Bloc, was set up to carry out the Declaration on Soviet-Polish Cooperation in the Field of Ideology, Science and Culture, signed by Gorbachev and Jaruzelski on April 21, 1987. Their statement called for new forms of communication to foster a "rapprochement of our two nations" and more specifically for the elimination of "blank spots" through joint, objective study of Soviet-Polish relations.¹ The step was a prime example of the use of *glasnost'* to diffuse political pressures in both domestic and intra-bloc relations. It was viewed as a relatively painless confidence-building measure that would at one stroke gain popularity for Jaruzelski's regime and improve the non-military underpinnings of the Soviet-Polish alliance.

History was a shrewdly targeted choice. Silence or untruths about such events as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which gave Hitler the green light to invade Poland in 1939, or the executions at Katyn of Polish officers interned in the USSR at the start of World War II, have been for most Poles a galling reminder that the imposition of Communist rule was reinforced with a crude rewriting of the past.

Nevertheless, this officially sponsored attempt to break the troublesome nexus between politics and history backfired. Instead of managing the more honest discussion of politically sensitive issues to their own advantage, Gorbachev and Jaruzelski opened up a Pandora's box. The gesture of

controlled conciliation produced side effects which altered the political scene in ways that were not planned by the two leaders.

First of all, deliberations of the Commission were unharmonious, straining and altering relations between Warsaw and Moscow. All along, it was the Polish side which pressed for and obtained concessions. That these concessions, some of which were not in Moscow's interest, were made at all testifies to the emergence of new relations that permitted genuine power-sharing.

In Poland, the existence of the Commission prompted increasingly daring attempts at a genuinely truthful account of events since 1945. The growing candor with which the establishment of Communist power and its rule were presented in the legal press, in public lectures, and in the media contributed to the mounting political crisis which led in April 1989 to the legitimization of political pluralism.

Finally, the work of the Commission fostered direct contacts and a meeting of minds between the reforming elements in both countries. In consequence, liberals active both inside and outside the two parties found a common cause — the struggle against totalitarian coercion.

Developments in these areas have been an integral part of the political ferment in Poland and the USSR. The pace of change falls into two distinct periods. During the first two years, as the following five sections describe, the process of de-ideologizing history was to some extent held in check by the fact that the Polish Communists held the monopoly of power. Since April 1989 — that is, since the recognition of

1 Trybuna Ludu, April 22, 1987, p. 5. The Commission is composed of historians picked by each party, many of whom do not enjoy much confidence within the profession. The Soviet side is headed by Georgii L. Smirnov, director of the Marxist-Leninist Institute. The Polish team is led by Jarema Maciszewski, rector of the Party's Academy of Social Sciences and author of solid studies on seventeenth century Polish-Russian relations. For more facts about membership and meetings, see Thomas Szayna, "Addressing 'Blank Spots' in Soviet-Polish Relations," *Problems of Communism*, vol. 37, no. 6 (November-December 1988), pp. 37-61.



the opposition, the electoral defeat of the Communists, and the appointment of the first non-Communist premier — all remaining constraints affecting the government, scholars and the media are being eliminated. These recent events have introduced an entirely different stage in bringing veracity to Soviet-Polish relations, wherein the carefully planned aims of the April 1987 Declaration have crumbled and lost political validity.

Soviet-Polish Tensions

The priorities of the two regimes in setting up the Joint Commission did not coincide. The Polish side pushed for candor about the blank spots in Soviet-Polish relations, while the Soviets preferred to focus on those issues that united rather than divided the two nations, such as the common struggle against the Nazis.

Jaruzelski faced a long-standing, more direct and hazardous challenge from the falsification of history than did Gorbachev. During the Solidarity period (August 1980-December 1981), the insistence on a truer version of Poland's recent domestic and foreign policies was very much part of the public's drive for greater freedom and autonomy. After the imposition of martial law, the military government did not lower a curtain of silence. Some objectively written articles and books, accepted for publication during the Solidarity days when censorship was very lax, were in fact published. Discussion of the unsatisfactory presentation of modern history continued at schools, universities and on the pages of journals. Furthermore, both the party and the army authorities were much concerned with the effects of falsification. They had come to recognize that the historical consciousness of society — so vastly different from the official version of events — was a fertile breeding ground for alienation and dissent.² By 1985, the independent Center for the Study of Public Opinion (CBOS), set up by Jaruzelski in 1982, had established a list of blank spots that were a source of the public's discontent and mistrust of the Communist authorities.³

Given this long-standing sensitivity of the Polish regime, it seems quite plausible that Jaruzelski alerted Gorbachev to the gravity of the issue, and that his perceptions and needs were instrumental in setting up the Joint Commission. At any rate, once the Commission was organized, the General supplied the list of topics to be covered in an article printed in the theoretical journals of the two parties.⁴

It was a very candid piece, an unprecedented list of Polish complaints and resentments. Concerning the October Revolution and the rebirth of Poland in 1918, Jaruzelski stressed that after 123 years of partitions most Poles wanted national

independence, not social revolution — a notable departure from the customary paeans to the October Revolution as the catalyst of Poland's resurrection. Concerning the 1920 war between the two countries, he mentioned both the Polish occupation of Kiev and the Red Army's march on Warsaw as having created a mutual distrust, thus eschewing the prescribed version which solely blamed Polish expansionism for the hostilities.

Regarding the outbreak of World War II, Jaruzelski specified three objectionable Soviet attitudes: (1) the description of both Poland's defensive war and Hitler's aggression as "imperialist"; (2) the dismissive language about Poland after the defeat, which denied the country the right to independence; and (3) the repression and deportation of thousands of Poles deep into the USSR. As for the course of the war, he spoke for the need to rehabilitate the Polish military effort on all fronts (i.e., a plea for the recognition of those who fought with the Western allies, not just those who fought on Moscow's side). There was a reference to the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party by the Comintern in 1938 — not the most important example of Soviet misconduct for most Poles, but still a taboo subject that rankled Polish Communists.

Jaruzelski's candor had an immediate effect. In September 1987 *The New Times* printed an apology by Georgii Smirnov, chairman of the Soviet side of the Commission. Revising the practice of the past forty-eight years, he stated that from the outset, World War II was a "defensive and just war" for Poland. He also condemned Viacheslav Molotov, Foreign Minister at the time, for his description of the independent Polish state after World War I as an "ugly product of Versailles."⁵

Katyn

Polish initiatives were not confined to the leadership level. Other echelons and groups became involved in pressing for a much broader rehabilitation of the past than was envisaged at the start. Discussion of Katyn and of Soviet-German contacts on the eve of World War II are two issues that best illustrate how the implementation of the Gorbachev-Jaruzelski agreement quickly reached far beyond the circumscribed scope of the original intentions.

Despite its unpreceded frankness, Jaruzelski's list of Polish desiderata was incomplete. It did not mention Katyn, which is for most Poles the gaping blank spot in the history of Polish-Soviet relations, symbolic of Moscow's designs to weaken and subjugate their country. But a series of bold moves, first by party reformers in both countries and then by

2 For a fuller account of history writing and discussions during the Solidarity and post-Solidarity period, see Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, "The Rise and Decline of Official Marxist Historiography in Poland, 1945-1983," *Slavic Review*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Winter 1985), pp. 672-680.

3 P. Kwiatkowski, A. Szpocinski, "Badanie sociologiczne nad swiadomoscia historyczna," *Edukacja Polityczna*, vol. 12 (1988), p. 161. The list consisted of six topics: Katyn; the USSR's policy toward Poland in 1939; the year 1956; the Warsaw uprising; history of the Polish CP; and Polish boundaries after World War II. Piotr Kwiatkowski conducted and analyzed the public opinion poll on Katyn, see note 9.

4 "K novym gorizontam," *Kommunist*, no. 11 (July 1987), pp. 59-73.

5 "Returning to the Lessons of the Past," *New Times*, no. 35 (September 2, 1987), pp. 18-22.

the opposition in Poland, forced the placement of Katyn on the Commission's agenda.

Polityka, the liberal Polish party weekly, took the initiative in October 1987 by publishing an interview with Iurii Afanas'ev, the outspoken and liberal director of the State Institute of Historical Archives in Moscow. The interview dealt mainly with the extent of de-Stalinization of history in the USSR, but also touched on the need to "clean up the history of Polish-Soviet relations." Here, Afanas'ev argued that no problem should be avoided, no matter how difficult or sensitive, including Katyn.⁶ That statement broke the taboo on mentioning Katyn in official publications. It also opened the way for a challenge to the Soviet position — doggedly maintained ever since the discovery of the Polish officers' bodies in 1943 by the retreating German armies — that the executions had been carried out by Nazi troops after they invaded the USSR in June 1941. The version widely accepted in Poland and backed by many international inquiries is that the officers were shot in the spring of 1940 by the Soviets.

Historians outside the Commission took advantage of the opening wedge made by *Polityka*. Among the more dramatic moves was that by Ryszard Bender, a professor at the autonomous Catholic University in Lublin and a politically unaffiliated delegate to Parliament. During a foreign policy debate in the Sejm, he argued that relations between Poland and the USSR would greatly improve with more forthright information about blank spots, foremost about Katyn.⁷

Another dramatic gesture was the February 1988 open letter from leading Polish intellectuals (including several prominent historians) to their Soviet counterparts. It asked for a genuine breakthrough in relations between the two nations through "a dialogue between free and independent people unhampered by official guidelines and diplomatic agreements" that would take up the Katyn executions.

The open letter brought a united response from the two regimes. They denounced it as a misguided gesture by "specialists in breaking down open doors," that is, ambitious trouble-makers eager to take over what the Joint Commission was already doing.⁸

The common stance did not last long, mainly because of mounting popular pressure on the Polish government. But Soviet intransigence in denying any responsibility for the mass executions also contributed. Probably the clearest sign of the Polish regime's displeasure with the Soviet stance was the publication in July 1988 (on the eve of Gorbachev's state visit) of a public opinion poll on Katyn, conducted the preceding autumn by the party's Center for the Study of Public

Opinion. It revealed that 82 percent of the adult population knew about the "crime" and that 68.4 percent of high school respondents blamed "the USSR" for it. The words chosen by the Center are highly significant. Whereas the February 1988 open letter from the Polish intellectuals tactfully pinned the executions on Stalin and Beria, the Center's poll referred to the USSR — much more of a blanket condemnation, but one in keeping with the attitude of most Poles.⁹

Despite such an obvious nudge from the Polish regime, Gorbachev chose not to address the issue. But he could not avoid it altogether and continued what was considered to have been an unsatisfactory dialogue with Polish intellectuals, which he held at the Warsaw royal castle, by publishing in November 1988 some "fuller" answers to their questions in a pamphlet intended for wide distribution. Gorbachev conceded that "many Poles are convinced that Katyn is the work of Stalin and Beria." However, he explicitly avoided endorsing that version of the event by reference to careful studies of the "tragedy" that were in progress.

At the same time he managed implicitly to present the unchanged Soviet version by mentioning that a memorial monument to Polish and Soviet military prisoners "executed by the Fascists" had been erected in Katyn to symbolize "the common suffering... of our two nations." The fact that *Trybuna Ludu* did not print Gorbachev's elaboration on what happened at Katyn (only his recognition of Polish sentiments) was a clear indication that the Polish Party did not accept his version of the event or its significance.¹⁰

Evidence of tensions between the two regimes was paralleled by developments within the Joint Commission. The Polish side prepared for the third meeting a detailed study of the sources on Katyn, seeking finally to disprove Soviet denials of any responsibility. The Soviets have all along relied on a single source — the Burdenko report presented by the USSR at the Nuremberg trials — and have paid no heed to reports by other international bodies or to documents gathered by families of the victims.

Neither the well-documented memorandum by Dr. Czeslaw Madajczyk nor the threat by some Polish members to resign produced any advance on this contentious issue. The communiqué of the third meeting stated that the Commission had familiarized itself with the "expert study concerning the fate of Polish officers interned in 1939 who died at Katyn and agreed that this question needs further study."¹¹

Although the Polish team did not resign, the Polish government evidently decided after the disappointing results of the third meeting to pursue its own course, independently of

6 "Prawo do własnej historii," *Polityka*, no. 40 (October 3, 1987), pp. 1-2.

7 *Dziariusz Sejmowy*, for March 10, 1988, p. 10. An extensive summary of Bender's remarks was printed in *Rzeczpospolita*, no. 59 (March 11, 1988), p. 7.

8 The letter was never published in the USSR, but it reached the Soviets via Western broadcasts. English text in *The New York Review of Books*, April 28, 1988, p. 46. Polish reaction: "Specjalisci do wywalania otwartych drzwi," *Trybuna Ludu*, March 12-13, 1988, reprinted in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, March 30, 1988, p. 9.

9 Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, *Opinia Publiczna o Zbrodni w Katyniu*, Warsaw, July 1988 (mimeographed), pp. 2, 5.

10 "Intelligentsia pered litsom novykh problem sotsializma," (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1988), p. 75. "Książka o spotkaniu Michala Gorbaczewa z przedstawicielami polskiej inteligencji," *Trybuna Ludu*, November 30, 1988, p. 2.

11 Cz. Madajczyk, "Dramatu katyńskiego akt drugi," *Miesięcznik Literacki*, no. 7 (1988), pp. 85-108. *Pravda*, December 3, 1988, p. 4.

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Moscow. On March 7, 1989, Jerzy Urban, the government spokesman, stated that "everything indicates that the crime... against Polish officers... was committed by the Stalinist NKVD."¹² It is not surprising that in reporting Urban's press conference, TASS excised all references to Katyn.

The Eve of World War II

The discussion of Nazi-Soviet relations in the months leading up to World War II followed a different track from that of Katyn. Here too, nevertheless, various pressures brought about a substantial change in the thrust of investigations. These pressures, in turn, shed light on the imperatives of Polish nationalism, on Jaruzelski's political needs, and on Soviet debates regarding *perestroika* in foreign policy.

Unlike Katyn, the events of 1939 were on the Joint Commission's agenda from the very start. However, the way the question was addressed was not in keeping with the national expectations of the Poles. The Soviet side sought to steer the investigation of the events preceding the signing of the non-aggression pact with Germany in August 1939 so as to demonstrate that the USSR had no other alternative. It was not interested in discussing the details of the Soviet-Nazi agreements. That attitude was best expressed publicly in Gorbachev's speech of November 2, 1987, marking the seventieth anniversary of the October revolution.

This was not what consumed the Polish public — or by extension the Polish government, which was not immune to national sentiments and desperately was trying to gain society's support. For the Polish public the broader issues of international diplomacy were irrelevant. Of vital importance were the secret protocols to the August 23 and September 28 pacts that delineated the boundaries between the two powers and gave the USSR a free hand to annex eastern Poland as well as the Baltic states. As with all the taboo topics, the basic facts of the case were common knowledge in Poland, passed on through oral tradition and accessible in Western or emigré publications. In addition, beginning with the Solidarity period, official publications alluded to the protocols, and one history of interwar Poland, published in 1986, even printed the text of the boundary agreements appended to the August 1939 pact.¹³

As it was, soon after the setting up of the Commission, the Polish side made sure that the hard facts of 1939 would not be shunted aside. Without relying on the help of Soviet reformers, as with Iurii Afanas'ev in the case of Katyn, a Polish member of the Commission published a series of articles on the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The ninth installment contained the text of the secret protocols.¹⁴ This step

12 *Trybuna Ludu*, March 8, 1989, p. 5.

13 A. Garlicki, ed., *Z Dziejów Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw 1986).

14 W. Kowalski, "Pakt Ribbentrop-Molotow," *Zycie Literackie*, no. 41 (October 11, 1987), p. 4.

15 *International Affairs*, November 1988, pp. 43-46.

16 V. M. Kulish, "U poroga wojny," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, August 24, 1988, p. 3; "V avguste 1939 goda," *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, August 24, 1988, p. 3; "The Road to War," *Moscow News*, no. 36 (September 11-18, 1988), p. 8.

created a serious démarche from Moscow, for the official Soviet position was to deny the protocols' existence since there was only a photocopy version found in Germany at the war's end and published by the US State Department.

Given the official Soviet stance, Polish historians both on and off the Commission, as well as reform-minded Soviet historians and foreign ministry officials, had to use considerable pressure and ingenuity to introduce factual objectivity.

In the fall of 1987 there was still no substantive discussion of Stalin's foreign policy in either the Soviet press or academic journals and no meaningful movement in the Joint Commission. A year later, however, serious analysis was already taking place. There is little doubt that reforms in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs contributed to this progress. In the summer of 1988, Eduard Shevardnadze held the first conference designed to instill into his staff the new principles of Soviet diplomacy, i.e., principles based not on class but on universally acceptable norms. Aleksandr Chubarian, director of the Institute of General History and a member of the Soviet team on the Joint Commission, was among those speakers who stressed the importance of objective diplomatic history for the renewal and success of Soviet foreign policy. He argued that the principles of peaceful coexistence would be strengthened and solidified by, among other things, a critical review of Soviet attitudes toward the Versailles system, for they had created the legal framework for the September 1939 friendship treaty with Germany, which in essence accommodated fascism.¹⁵

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' efforts to introduce *perestroika* into Soviet diplomacy gave the green light (and, possibly, better documentation) to Soviet scholars and substantial debate ensued. The military historian Vasili Kulish discussed in detail the Nazi-Soviet negotiations, making indirect references to the secret protocols and adding that mention of the second pact had been taboo in Soviet publications. An article in the Estonian magazine *Rahva Haal*, with the actual text of the secret addenda to the August 1939 pact, was subsequently reprinted and discussed in a Russian language paper. But Valentin Falin, then director of the Novosti press agency, still expressed serious doubts about the authenticity of the August 1939 secret protocols since they existed only in "copies of copies."¹⁶

This opening in the USSR made it possible for the Joint Commission to move off dead center. A joint report on the events preceding the outbreak of World War II was almost ready at the time of the third meeting in early December 1988. But the report was not made public until May 25, 1989. The timing of its release was significant. It appeared shortly before the first free elections in Poland since 1945. Thus it was part

of the regime's effort to convince the electorate that Warsaw's relations with the USSR were no longer subservient and grounded on the falsified mythology concocted in Moscow.¹⁷

Factual and fairly well-documented, the report nevertheless stressed Poland's isolation facing an aggressive Germany at a time when Moscow was ready to help. In this respect, it was a plea to the electorate not to undermine Poland's alliance with the USSR. In case the benefits of that alliance were not compelling enough to Polish readers, an introduction supplied by *Trybuna Ludu* made two points. It stressed that the Commission's report was critical of the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland. Here the message was: we are not puppets, we can criticize the USSR. And, it held, the report testified that "we are removing everything that harmed friendship and cooperation."

In subsequent months Polish historians subjected the joint report to harsh criticism, bearing witness to how much free expression had progressed after the June elections. Though the report discussed the second Soviet-Nazi pact (which only a year earlier was an unmentionable subject in the USSR) and was the first official acknowledgement of the secret protocols, commentators found it to be insufficiently condemnatory about the immorality and illegality of Soviet-German deals.

Side Effects in Poland

The establishment of the Joint Commission was a gesture designed to win public confidence for Jaruzelski's regime. But instead of leading to national reconciliation, the Commission's work unleashed further political pressures, which became part of the process that in April 1989 forced the Communists to recognize political pluralism.

Independent-minded historians and journalists took the establishment of the Commission as their signal to press for speedier and more candid work on the blank spots under the jurisdiction of the official body. They went further, actively expanding the coverage of Polish history. As a result, the public could obtain — from legally published sources, from television and even from schools — an increasingly unadulterated version of Polish history in the twentieth century.

As in the case of Katyn or of 1939, much of this information was no revelation to Poles. But the publication of documentary evidence on taboo subjects and the objective discussion of falsified topics in the official media were novel. Fuller accounts of how Poland regained independence in 1918

and how People's Poland was created after World War II did not alter Soviet-Polish relations in the sense of undermining the military alliance. Nevertheless, this process severely undercut the legitimacy of Communist power in Poland. Historical commentaries contributed heavily to discrediting the Communists before the free vote.

Monographs and articles documented the economic and cultural progress achieved during the interwar years, bringing into sharp relief the various failures of People's Poland under Communist rule. Similarly, solid biographies of major political figures (such as Marshal Joseph Pilsudski and Roman Dmowski, leader of the National Democratic camp) and even lesser ones (such as Edward Rydz-Smigly, Pilsudski's ineffectual successor) have been published. Pilsudski enjoys a veritable personality cult, so much so that *Polityka*, in its last issue for 1988, had a caricature showing the outgoing year trampling on Stalin's portrait but elevating that of the Marshal in its stead.¹⁸

Concerning World War II, the extent to which Poles fought on the Western front, and not just on the Soviet side, was openly discussed. Similarly, it was no longer concealed that the pro-London Home Army (AK) had a much larger membership than the pro-Moscow People's Army (AL) and that it bore the brunt of the fighting against the Nazis in occupied Poland. General Berling's recently published memoirs shed light for the first time on the political and personal rivalries among Poles who chose to fight on the Soviet side. He recounts, among other things, how the internationalist-minded elements led by Wanda Wasilewska, more loyal to Moscow than to Poland, eased him out from the leadership of the Polish units in the USSR.¹⁹

Coverage of the early post-war years did not spare details on the force and subterfuge used by the Soviets and Communists to gain and retain power as the Red Army advanced into Poland. Increasingly more material was being published on how the AK helped liberate major cities in eastern Poland, how they sought and managed to establish cooperation with the Red Army, only to be arrested by the NKVD once the German units were gone.²⁰ Probably the articles that best captured the essence of the process were those dealing with the arrest of the sixteen Polish underground leaders, loyal to the London government-in-exile, who agreed to meet and negotiate with Soviet authorities in the city of Pruszków. Upon arrival there, they were flown to Moscow, imprisoned, and put on trial.²¹ While none received a death sentence, several — including the top underground leader General

17 The report was printed in *Pravda* on May 25, 1989, and in the May 24–25, 1989 issue of *Trybuna Ludu*.

18 R. Wapinski, *Roman Dmowski* (Lublin: Wyd. Lubelskie, 1988); A. Garlicki, *Józef Piłsudski, 1867–1935* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1988); R. Mirowicz, *Edward Rydz-Smigły* (Warsaw: Wyd. Związków Zawodowych, 1988).

19 P. Matusiak, *Ruch Oporu w Polsce, 1939–1945* (Katowice, 1987). General Berling's memoirs were shown in a movie version on Polish television on October 12, 1988, to commemorate Polish Army Day. The show occasioned quite a lively discussion in the press with additional information about the "blank spots" of that period.

20 See the interview with R. Korab-Zebryk, author of *Operacja Wilenska AK* (Warsaw, 1985) in *Lad*, no. 36 (September 4, 1988), p. 31, and the publication of the epilogue to his book (which was censored in 1985) in *Odrodzenie*, nos. 42 and 43 (October 15 and 22, 1988). E. Erdman's *Droga do Osrej Bramy*, published in London in 1984, is scheduled for publication by the Defense Ministry in 1989.

21 See the interview with one survivor: Adam Bien, "Kulisy procesu szesnastu," *Lad*, nos. 20 and 21 (May 15 and 22, 1988).

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Leopold Okulicki — died in Soviet prisons under mysterious circumstances.

Related in substance were the documented memoirs of Henryk Różanski, a close adviser to top Polish economic expert Hilary Minc. Różanski shows how the Soviets demanded and obtained excessive war reparations not only from the former German territories ceded to Poland but also from Silesia, which had been Polish since World War I.²²

Quite a few articles related how the 1946 referendum had been rigged. Such facts have been collected and analyzed in Krystyna Kersten's excellent scholarly monograph, *Birth of the System of Power*, published abroad in 1986.²³ Even though it was easily available in late 1988 (openly sold in the courtyard of Warsaw University right in front of signs forbidding such peddling), it was very expensive. Reaching a much wider audience, the articles in the press detailing the Communist seizure of power were a constant reminder that the Party's rule had been attained by illegitimate means.

Stalinism in Poland and its aftermath was a fourth area that had been opened up to a more liberal treatment in the legal press since April 1987. The range of publications and interpretations was considerable, from pretty tame biographies to condemnatory revelations about secret executions.

The critical review included the more recent, post-Stalinist times. Typical was the dissection of what happened in 1968, when unrest among Warsaw University students was manipulated and used by one wing of the Party to unleash an anti-Semitic campaign and to oust its rivals from power.²⁴ Many publications delved into the causes of the repeated workers' strikes and political unrest that have plagued Poland from 1956 onward.

Horizontal Ties

The establishment of the Joint Commission encouraged grass-root activity on various levels in both countries. These horizontal ties are the creative laboratories where the official "new thinking" is being transformed into culturally valid and acceptable norms that can provide the only lasting and stable underpinning for an equal partnership. They run independent of, but parallel to, the official programs. In the USSR, the April 1987 Declaration raised the curtain of silence not just on the blank spots in Soviet-Polish relations but also on Poland in general. With the onset of the Solidarity period, everything Polish, whether films or publications, became suspect. So much so that even *Polityka*, the liberal Party weekly, became unavailable. The iron curtain of suspicion remained down during the subsequent years and only after the Declaration on Cooperation in Ideology was signed did it

begin to lift. On an unofficial level, Soviet interest in Poland — its freer institutions, its Westernized culture — has been quite pronounced since 1956. But in the past this fascination was a matter of private curiosity. At present it openly lures a broad range of Soviet reformers, both within and without the establishment.

Historians took out of their desk drawers articles on Poland that could not be published during the Brezhnev era. The same happened with translations of Polish works in the social sciences. Various newly established organizations in the USSR reached out to their counterparts in Poland, ranging from university-affiliated groups to the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK). With travel restrictions across the border relaxed, meetings and joint seminars began to be arranged with ease.

As a result, one can already sense a different, much fuller and more tolerant coverage of Polish history and opinions — interpretations that are not as cautious and formal as the pronouncements emanating from the Joint Commission. For example, an article by a former correspondent in Poland gave a sympathetic explanation of the reasons for Polish resentments against the USSR, from the inactivity of the Red Army during the Warsaw uprising in 1944 (which allowed the Nazis to crush the pro-Western resistance movement) to the continuing refusal of the Soviet side to come up with some response to the Katyn issue. The article treated Polish resentments not only as credible but also cited facts supporting these feelings.²⁵

A similar undogmatic approach marked a recent review of Polish post-war historiography. It did not attempt to cram Polish scholarship into narrowly defined Marxist-Leninist categories but recognized the individual contributions of various scholars, stressing their considerable achievements in the field of methodology. It took a novel path in not bestowing praise for congruence with Soviet views but in acknowledging independent, non-ideological excellence.²⁶

The publication in *New Times* of an article by a reputable Polish historian (who is not on the Joint Commission) to mark the seventieth anniversary of Poland's independence was another significant departure. It gave Soviet readers an excellent multi-dimensional presentation of events leading up to Poland's rebirth in 1918. The author made ample references to such factors as international diplomacy and Pilsudski's leadership, not just to the October Revolution with its slogans of national liberation. From a scholarly standpoint the article was unbiased and sound, while at the same time it gave a Polish interpretation of the course of events.²⁷

The salutary influence of direct contacts, plus the *perestroika* of learning in the USSR, was probably best

22 *Sladem Wspomnien i Dokumentów, 1943-1948* (Warsaw: PWM, 1987).

23 *Narodziny Systemu Władzy. Polska 1943-1948* (Paris: Libella, 1986).

24 K. Kersten, "Rok 1968: motyw żydowski," *Res Publica*, March 1988; the March 6, 1988 issue of *Lad* (no. 10) was largely given over to the events of 1968.

25 L. Podrivalov, "Poliaki i my," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, no. 14 (April 5, 1989), p. 5.

26 V. A.D'Iakov, "Razrabotka uchenymi PNR teorotiko-metodologicheskikh problem istoricheskoi nauki," *Istoria SSSR*, no. 1, 1989, pp. 103-115.

27 A. Garlicki, "Factors for National Rebirth," *New Times*, no. 45 (November 1988), pp. 38-39.

exemplified by the meeting (the first ever) of some two hundred Soviet historians specializing in Poland, organized in January 1989 by the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies. Its recommendations to the profession proposed, among other things, a broader interpretation of Polish history. Eschewing the narrow revolution- and class-oriented focus, it urged encompassing the full breadth of Poland's national and cultural experience.²⁸

During the first two years of the Commission's existence there were novel developments on the Polish side as well. For the first time there was marked interest and respect for what is taking place in the USSR. Of course, the Polish regime was eager to promote *perestroika* and often reprinted appropriate articles from the Soviet press. But there was spontaneous interest in and response to Soviet processes on other levels, and this was unprecedented. The liberal Party reformers in *Polityka* backed their counterparts in the USSR; Catholic intellectuals were very much taken with the moral revival evident in the Soviet Union; many Solidarity activists, especially the movement's theoretician, Adam Michnik, wanted to visit the USSR and sought out contacts; young jurists took note of what the Soviet Institute of State and Law was doing and organized joint conferences.

The direct contacts between Soviet and Polish filmmakers were an apposite example of the new, horizontal ties before spring 1989, demonstrating the ease with which a common language could be found among people not bound by official instructions or Party discipline.

The first meeting took place in Moscow in April 1988. It was the outcome of an agreement signed the previous year between the two film associations to cooperate on "History in Films." The agenda and the presence of historians in addition to filmmakers brought on the discussion of taboo subjects. *Literaturnaia Gazeta* printed a short one-page report on the proceedings. Its bland title, "'Blank Spots': From Emotion to Facts" and the content of the report did not convey the real and very emotional substance of discussions (which exist in a 170-page stenographic report).²⁹

Emotions took over from the outset, for the deputy director of the Polish Filmmakers Association started on a personal note filled with historical and political resonances. His father had been imprisoned in Starobelsk (one of the three prison camps from which Polish officers were taken to Katyn for execution), and the last letter his family received was dated March 10, 1940.

In the discussion on taboo subjects that followed, the three Soviet historians (all associated with the Joint Commission either as members or as consultants) took a cautious position, stressing the need for dispassionate, painstaking

research based on ample documentation. But the fourth Soviet historian, the independent and outspokenly liberal scholar Natan Eidelman, fully agreed with his Polish colleagues in countering this position with the argument that it amounted to avoiding responsibility. Enough direct and indirect evidence, as well as plenty of eye-witness reports, existed to permit drawing conclusions about such events as Katyn, the Nazi-Soviet deals of 1939 or the mass deportations of the population from eastern Poland after the Red Army invaded.

The Denouement Since April 1989

As already mentioned above, the historic compromise of April 1989, which dethroned the Communists and gave legitimacy to the opposition, profoundly affected the Commission's fate and public discussion of taboo subjects. Political pluralism has put an effective end to the Party's self-arrogated prerogative of interpreting the past and opened the door for genuinely free discussion of the disputed subjects.

In this situation the Commission became superfluous — a fact its activities after May 1989 confirmed. To begin with, the fourth plenary session, scheduled for May 1989, was first postponed a month; after the Polish elections it was put off indefinitely. During the summer, the unilateral initiative on Katyn taken by the Polish side split the Commission and exposed the futility of joint efforts on this key issue. On August 19, 1989, the Poles published a critical refutation of the Burdenko report which had been the sole Soviet response to Polish pressures for a fresh reconsideration of the numerous facts and publications that have surfaced since 1944.³⁰

Furthermore, the Katyn issue became a public matter on a far different level of discourse and action, reflecting the post-election shift in power and the newly found sense of national sovereignty. In September there were several interpolations in the Parliament, demanding government action on behalf of the families of the Katyn victims. The following month, the Polish Procurator-General, referring to the recent public refutation of the Burdenko report, requested his Soviet counterpart to start legal proceedings into the murder of the interned Polish officers on Soviet soil.³¹

The fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the start of World War II provided further opportunity for similar outspokenness about another set of blank spots. The secret protocols had been sufficiently exposed the preceding year and by August 1989 even Valentin Falin acknowledged their existence. The burden of the exposés now centered on the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17, 1939 — hitherto an unmentionable subject. No less a paper than *Trybuna Ludu* printed an article condemning the unexpected attack as both

28 "Rekomendatsii Vsesoyuznogo soveshchaniia istorikov-polonistov," (Moscow: typed, January 28, 1989).

29 *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, May 11, 1988, p. 14. Soiuz Kinematografistov SSSR, *Stenogramma sovetskogo-pol'skogo simpoziuma "Istoricheskoe kino: ot tabuk k glasnosti"* (Moscow: mimeographed). Andrzej Wajda's forthcoming movie on Katyn was spurred by this cooperation.

30 "Dokument w sprawie Katynia przekazany przez historyków polskich historykom radzieckim," *Polityka*, no. 38 (August 18, 1989), pp. 13-14. The text of the Polish refutation had been submitted to the Soviet side in May 1988 but remained unanswered.

31 "Komunikat Prokuratury Generalnej PRL," *Trybuna Ludu*, October 13, 1989, pp. 1, 4.

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an immoral stab in the back and a violation of international law.³² (Interestingly enough, the May 1989 statement by the Joint Commission about World War II treated the invasion as a Soviet move to protect the Belorussian and Ukrainian population against the advancing German armies.)

Soviet policies in Poland at the end of the war have become another topic for harsh condemnation from all quarters. The aforementioned statement by the Polish Procurator-General regarding Katyn also requested that the USSR start proceedings to rehabilitate the sixteen pro-London underground leaders sentenced in June 1945. A documentary movie on their Moscow trial (completed this August despite countless difficulties that included the mysterious disappearance of some footage and its equally mysterious reappearance after the June elections) is about to be shown on Polish television. And a well-documented book about the arrest and trial appeared in the stores this October.³³

Finally, in the past few months, cooperation between the Polish and Soviet reformers has risen to a new, closer and more productive level. Adam Michnik, who in the fall of 1988 was refused an entry visa, has since last summer participated in several Soviet meetings devoted to *perestroika*. The liberal wing of the Soviet press has become quite outspoken in explaining the importance of the blank spots for the Polish national psyche and in publicizing facts related to these matters. Thus Natan Eidelman, who a year earlier addressed only small circles of listeners on Poland, is now commenting in Soviet papers on Soviet-Nazi relations at the start of World

War II.³⁴ Both *Literaturnaia Gazeta* and *Moskovskie Novosti* printed additional information about Katyn with clear indications of Soviet guilt and pleas to the Soviet government to end its silence.³⁵

In view of the course of exposing blank spots, there is little doubt that the combined efforts of Poles and their Soviet supporters, plus the evident disposition of Gorbachev to accommodate Poland's need to prove its sovereignty, will sooner or later bring on Moscow's admission of its responsibility for the Katyn crime.

It is equally evident that, given the turn of events since last spring, the demise of the Commission is certain. It may declare itself dissolved. More likely it will simply die a natural death. No historian I interviewed in Poland this October believed that it could ever again play any significant political or academic role. The Commission's make-up, its mode of operations and its goals are as discredited and out of step with present-day needs and aspirations as the Party that created it.

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32 Ryszard Drecki, "17 wrzesnia," *Ibid.*, September 16-17, 1989, p. 4.

33 Eugeniusz Duraczynski, *General Iwanow Zaprasza* (Warsaw: Alfa, 1989).

34 "A Week before World War II," *Moscow News*, no. 34 (August 27-September 3, 1989), pp. 8-9; "The Polish Tragedy," *Ibid.*, no. 39 (October 1-18, 1989), pp. 8-9.

35 A. Akulichev, A. Pamiatnykh, "Katyn' — podverdit' ili oprevergnut'," *Moskovskie Novosti*, no. 21 (May 21, 1989), p. 16. G. Zhavoronkov, "Tainy katin'skogo lesa," *Ibid.*, no. 32 (August 6, 1989), p. 15. On September 6, 1989, *Literaturnaia Gazeta* published a Polish 1942 report on Katyn, as well as an interview with the sole surviving NKVD official who dealt with the interned Polish officers, that were accompanied by a statement about the need for an official Soviet answer.